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## Letter of the Superior General: European Conference of Visitors (CEVIM)

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April 12, 1999

*To the members of the European Conference of Visitors (CEVIM)*

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

When I came to the General Curia in 1986, I would never have envisioned the changes that would soon take place in Europe. Few did. Since then the Iron Curtain has fallen with dramatic suddenness. The European Community has moved ahead in forging stronger political and economic bonds. At the beginning of this year the euro burst upon the world market. Though it remains largely hidden from those of us who still hold lira, francs, pesetas, and marks in our hands, all our treasurers know that these are now just euros in disguise! A few weeks ago, NATO extended its borders eastward, something unthinkable at the beginning of the decade.

Of course, not all the signs point toward unification. As one looks at the continued violence in Kosovo, where the extermination of thousands of Albanians has provoked outside intervention by NATO, one fears that deep-seated attitudes have not really changed significantly since 1914. Immigrants pour into European countries at a rate never equaled in the history of the world. The growing presence of Islam in so many nations presents new challenges for evangelization. Centuries ago, Christians raised armies to combat "the invasion of Muslim hordes." Today, as even greater numbers of Muslims live relatively peacefully within our midst, we must ask how best to relate with them pastorally. More than a decade and a half ago, Karl Rahner challenged Europe to grapple with the problem of Islam in a theological and pastoral way and not just politically and polemically.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, centrifugal and centripetal forces have existed for millennia in Europe. The Romans dreamed of its unity and the "Pax Romana." But even in the best of times, it was an uneasy peace. The Holy Roman Empire projected the same hope, with Christianity as the unifying element. But an increasingly divided Christendom saw the rise of nationalism, competing individual states, and imperial powers.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Aspects of European Theology" in *Theological Investigations* XXI (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 78-98.

It has never been easy to define "Europe." In fact, it is a relatively modern idea that gradually replaced the earlier concept of "Christendom." Its eastern boundary especially has had a fluid history. The present convention marks it at the Ural Mountains, almost precisely where our confreres have their new mission in Ni\_nij Tagil. But there is nothing sacred about this boundary which, in fact, has been often disputed. Even today it is evident that the "European Community" does not embrace many parts of "Europe." Russia's credentials for belonging to Europe have often been contested; from time to time, Britain's have been questioned too, even by her own citizens, many of whom still refer to Europe as "the Continent"! Some prefer to define Europe by cultural criteria rather than geographical ones. T. S. Eliot placed the emphasis on the Christian tradition as the unifying factor. He wrote: "The dominant feature in creating a common culture between peoples, each of which has its own distinct culture, is religion ... I'm talking about the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is, and about the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it...."

Some note, in contrast with Eliot's view, that a number of key elements in modern European history have come from outside religious circles and have even met considerable resistance therein: the movement toward democratic government, scientific methodology and its consequences, freedom of the press and cultural pluralism. Others remark how strikingly religious practice has declined in recent decades, particularly in Western Europe. Still others observe an increasing polarization within contemporary Christianity with extreme groups on both ends of the ideological spectrum denying key elements in traditional Christian teaching. In some European countries women are beginning to share in the alienation from the Catholic Church that large numbers of their counterparts in the United States and Australia have been experiencing over the past decade. Beyond religious controversy, and perhaps even more significant, is the glaring indifference many show toward religion today in previously Christian lands. Some proclaim openly that it is irrelevant in their lives; others manifest silently that they simply have no interest in it at all.

The European Episcopal Conference and the 1998 Synod for Europe have attempted to address the breakdown of "Christian culture" and many of the related questions described above. This has proved no easy task.

Diversity has been one of Europe's most enduring characteristics. The European Community has 11 official languages, not to mention the numerous native tongues of significant minority groups. There are striking differences among Europe's states and cultures; multiplicity underlies its civilization as a whole. This variety, which has stimulated rich traditions in literature, music, art, philosophy, theology, and other fields, has been the source of great richness. It will undoubtedly continue to exist even as the European nations take steps toward political unification.

What is most evident in the contemporary setting is that economic motives have played a key role, perhaps even a dominant one, in pushing the political process forward.

The question "What is Europe?" has relevance when we speak about the European Visitors' Conference (CEVIM). At times some ask: "Should there not be two or three conferences, since our economic-cultural-political-religious situations are so different?" Others state, on the contrary: "How can we think of breaking up the conference precisely at a time when the 'European Community' is moving toward greater unity?"

Today I suggest to you some points for discussion. I intend them as an encouragement toward common reflection at this meeting and common action in the future and as rallying points around which greater unity can be promoted, while at the same time preserving the rich diversity that has characterized the many provinces that make up the conference.

The changes contemporary Europe is experiencing have affected the life and ministry of the Congregation very significantly. Vocations have declined dramatically in Western Europe. The work of the popular missions has undergone a significant critique. In some places the traditional form of mission remains effective. In others, provinces seek for new methods for the integral evangelization and upbuilding of parish communities. Our work in the formation of the diocesan clergy has shrunk, and even disappeared, in a number of countries. The post-Vatican II era has challenged the Congregation to take a more active role in helping form lay men and women to participate more fully in the evangelization of the poor (C 1, 3\_).

Here are my suggestions for your reflection:

1. In our most recent *tempo forte* General Council meeting, we decided to ask CLAPVI, ASPAC, and COVIAM to set up regional centers for the formation of formators, using as a model something like this:
  - a. The formators of that particular region (those presently engaged as formators and those whom the Visitors foresee for that service) would gather once a year
  - b. during the summer (i.e., the time of the long vacation in the northern or southern hemisphere),
  - c. for two or three weeks.
  - d. Someone, or a committee, would be responsible for organizing a program of Vincentian formation over that period. This program would

involve: 1) study, 2) sharing of experiences and concerns as formators, 3) community life and prayer together during that two- or three-week period.

e. This program would be offered every summer, but the topics treated and the concerns discussed would change each summer so that the same formators could participate in an ongoing way in these sessions (as, for example, the topics change each year for the Salamanca week in Spain).

We did not think that this approach would be suitable for CEVIM because of the very different lived reality within the many countries that make up your conference. My question to you is this: Seeing what the General Council is asking of CLAPVI, ASPAC, and COVIAM, what does CEVIM propose for the formation of its formators, particularly in light of the *Final Document* of the General Assembly of 1998, III, 3, B, 3a ("The Superior General and his council should study the possibility of creating in one or more places: a) an international center for the formation of our formators")?

2. Never in the history of the world have there been more refugees than today. You see them flooding, I am sure, into most of your countries. They are usually very poor and very abandoned. Can the mission of the Congregation in Europe place a special emphasis on these refugees, as is already the case in some of our countries? Can that be a uniting focus for the ministry of the Congregation in Europe? Can there be interprovincial and even international works that reach out to these refugees?
3. The European Community has its center in Brussels. AIC has placed its Permanent Secretariat there in order to influence policy within the European Union. Is there something that we can do to make the "European voice" of the Congregation of the Mission express itself more clearly in Brussels? (As you know, we have recently begun to send a representative to the United Nations in New York.)
4. At our last *tempo forte* session of the General Council, we examined the results of the evaluation that each of the provinces made on its use of the "Resource Book for Vincentian Morning and Evening Prayer" and other materials for fostering our Vincentian common prayer. Though some provinces reported quite positive results, the overall response was somewhat disappointing. Several of the provinces within CEVIM worked very hard on this matter and produced some very good materials for promoting common prayer with a Vincentian tone, but actually only one Visitor in CEVIM reported an enthusiastic reception on the part of the confreres of his province. As you recall, the goal of the whole process in which we have been engaging is not a book in any form. That is only an instrument. The goal continues to be to intensify and renew the prayer life of the Congregation in light of our Constitutions, offering "something beautiful for God"

and attractive to the young. Why, in your judgment, has there not been a more energetic, enthusiastic engagement on the part of the confreres in this process? What do you suggest as a next step in the process of encouraging renewal in our common prayer?

5. The euro is here! Even though the currency is not in our hands, all bank transfers and investments are already taking place in euros. Would it be good for CEVIM (the Visitors and Economes) to begin thinking about common investment strategies for the future? Since investments will be basically within the same currency and economic framework, are there people within CEVIM who are knowledgeable about investments and who can assist all of the provinces by offering good counsel?
6. Given the new reality of Europe, perhaps the moment has arrived for CEVIM to reexamine its statutes in order to create a more effective structure for ongoing communication during the course of the year and for better preparation of its annual meetings.

Those are my thoughts. I regret very much that I am not able to be with you during your meeting. I have very happy memories of my visit to Lebanon two years ago. I am about to depart, as perhaps you know, for the ASPAC meeting and then for a visit to Continental China. I will be returning to Rome via Chicago where I will be giving a conference at the 100th anniversary of DePaul University. I will be thinking of you all in these days, asking the Lord to pour out his Spirit on you as you gather in this meeting.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General

